

ART

RECYCLING TRADITION



ART

In the past year, sculptor and visual artist Nicholas Hlobo exhibited locally and abroad — and he has a show scheduled in Oslo this month.

Nechama Brodie

meets the rising star of the SA art scene

On my way to meet Nicholas Hlobo at his studio in August House on End Street, I got lost. I had visited August House just a few months previously, to watch artist Mary Sibande unravel one of 19 giant building wraps featuring Sophie the domestic worker — part of her series titled *Long Live the Dead Queen* that was installed on canvases around the city. But Sophie had moved on to other facades, leaving the inner-city tenements as she had found them. Unsigned. Unknowable.

At one time, End Street marked the eastern perimeter of Johannesburg. A surveyor's mark on the piece of *uitvalgrond* (surplus ground) known as the Randjeslaagte triangle, which fell between the farms of Doornfontein, Braamfontein and Turffontein. In the west, Diagonal Street drew an acute line from Commissioner up to the triangle's apex on Boundary Road. The enclosed street names revealed the city as it was: Quartz, Claim, Nugget, Banket. A mineral landscape plotted out below ground. On the surface, everything changed, kept changing.

When I looked up, I was on Error Street.

Johannesburg is a city of metaphors, one not easily given to the softness of simile. This is where 35-year-old Hlobo — born in Cape Town, raised in the Eastern Cape, Joburger by choice — turns dreams into shapes. He often takes refuge on the rooftop of his building. "I go there to think," he says. "I spend most of my time thinking."

A former Standard Bank Young Artist and the current Rolex Visual Arts Protégé (a programme which pairs him with influential sculptor Anish Kapoor for a year), Hlobo's body of work — sculptures and drawings crafted from rubber and ribbon, paper and leather, paint and gauze, together with occasional playful performance pieces — is populated by tactile, visceral things. He has exhibited at the Tate Modern in London and the Institute for Contemporary Art in Boston, at last year's Liverpool Biennial, and he has a major survey of his work scheduled for Oslo later this year. But the language of his creations is soft-spoken, ephemeral, disembodied: Nicholas in conversation.

"Each work starts in my head," he says. "Something has to move me. A word. Something else. It's hard to tell what will happen when I'm building a sculpture. I like hiding my ideas until I know. I turn to sketch, to writing ... Often there are very few sketches, only lines scribbled in isiXhosa."

Hlobo almost always titles his works in



Top: A close-up of "Phalela mgama and Wanyus' msila" (2010), ribbon and rubber on canvas, 180x240cm

Above: "li-isobar nemimoya ngeyeKhala" (2010), wool and ribbon on canvas, 150x240cm

isiXhosa. One of his paintings is called "Icephe, ifolokhwe nebhoso yi five pounds ten, isitulo samaNgesi sihlal' iBhulukazi" — which translates as "a spoon, a fork and a knife is £5.10, on an English chair sits an Afrikaner woman". It was inspired by a children's game that was once popular in the Eastern Cape.

"The language I use doesn't have a long history as a written language, but it is quite rich in grammar, in poetry, in metaphors," Hlobo says. "I like metaphors. They're open-ended. Or they can close things that are very open. All spoken languages employ metaphor. I also like inventing my own metaphors. I think it's fun. They can soften a

subject matter. When you give something another name, it makes it easier for people to take in. Metaphors unpack and create their own meaning. I might talk about a swing but not be referring to a seat that's hung from a frame. When you're on a swing the world around you becomes distorted, fluid, elongated. You view things in an unusual way."

Art critic and author Sean O'Toole comments that, "even in a South African context, Nicholas's works can be incredibly cryptic. You have to be conversant in Xhosa language and tradition to decipher some of the layers. But I don't think they're hermetic. His kraal with pink braiding ["Umthubi", 2006, which is the milk from a cow, cooked by shepherds to feed its newborn calf] — just as a piece of sculpture, it's gorgeous."

"I like questioning the meaning of an object, a situation," says Hlobo, "and then creating value where most people believe there could be none. I build sculptures out of things other people have discarded, that they did not value. For me, it equates to the processes we are going through in this country. We are still trying to find ourselves. We are looking for new ideas about how we represent ourselves. Looking at each day with fresh eyes — but they're still the same old eyes that haven't forgotten what yesterday looked like. The past informs the future."

Much of Hlobo's work probes his own past — exploring Xhosa heritage and traditions — with accents of his present, living as a gay man in modern South Africa.

"I know very little about my history," Hlobo says. "It motivates and scares me at the same time. My works are not an open book. They reveal some things, conceal some things. I get surprised by people who say they know me, even though I've never spoken to them. It makes me feel like a child who wants to hide under his mother's frock at the table — when your feet poke out, and people can still see you're there."

Hlobo admits he worries some people buy his works "not to respect [its] purpose, but for

their own needs. Then they've got a piece of me, somewhere. My work is very personal. If not for the need for money, I wouldn't be selling it. But I'd still be making it. At the same time, I'm very happy someone can give them a home, and provide sustenance for me so I can create other things."

Says O'Toole: "What I find heartening — if you take Hlobo's art over the past three or four years and you look at his vertical ascent — is that, in the last decade, a lot of local artists who have made in-roads internationally are photographers. I don't want to knock photography. But it's quite fantastic to see a South African sculptor in prime place."

"In the art world, people are often scared to have opinions and make choices," O'Toole adds, "but there is a greater awareness among European and North American collectors — who are still the most important power base — that they need to expand their holdings. Nicholas has received enough commendations and recommendations for people to look at, and even buy, with assurance. If you just look at the geographies of where his work has been shown ... Michael Stevenson [Hlobo's Cape Town-based gallerist] has worked hard to make these exhibitions possible, to get visibility for his artists. That has been a huge part of Nicholas's success."

Hlobo says that before he met Stevenson he was "really hibernating, and dreaming. I was arrogant. I didn't want to be with a commercial gallery. But what I find interesting, now, is how I've been allowed to be; to become a child and do what makes me happy. But I'm still challenged, still expected to produce. When I met Anish, he said: 'You seem like you already know where you're going.' Many people believe I've reached my destination. But I have not. I've only paused at a few stops. This is a little cameo of where I hope to be. My mum's advice was that in life you don't need to run for success. Just dream and walk carefully. It's difficult. I always get tempted; I need to chase. Learning to be content is very difficult."